DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 400 FL 020 079

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TITLE Emotional Hindrances in the FL Learning Situation: The Weak Self Concept.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 9p.; In: Equality in Language Learning. Proceedings of the Nordic Conference of Applied Linguistics (5th, Jyvaskyla, Finland, June 4-7, 1987); see FL 020 065.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; *Educational Environment; Emotional Response; *Learning Motivation; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; *Self Concept; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Some affective/emotional factors in the foreign language learning situation that tend to hinder the learner in learning the target language are analyzed. Beginning with an explanation of theory concerning the "affective filter" and learning, the discussion proceeds to research findings on self-concept and their relationship to the affective filter and to learning difficulties. General, academic, and target language-specific self concept are all examined. These concepts are then presented in the form of a model of second language learner motivation. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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EMOTIONAL HINDRANCES IN THE FL LEARNING SITUATION: THE WEAK SELF CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at an analysis of some affective/emotional factors in the FL learning situation which tend to hinder the learner in/from learning the target language (TL). Starting with a presentation of some ideas concerning the 'affective filter', the author focuses on the learner's self concept as a very central factor affecting TL learning and achievement. General, academic, and TL specific self concepts are discussed, and an operationalization scheme is presented. A series of small-scale studies is used as background data at a point where validation study is being planned.

1. On the 'mental block' syndrome

It is a well-known phenomenon that many persons who have all the qualifications to learn a foreign language, perhaps - overtly - even the will, fail to do so for some emotional reasons (Nida 1958, Schumann 1978). We posit a psychological construct, a 'filter' of some kind, which rises/stands in the way of incoming language data. The term, 'socio-affective filter', 'affective filter', or simply 'filter' was first used by Dulay and Burt (1977), was included in Krashen's theories (see eg. Krashen 1982), and has been used widely in professional discussions in the 1980's. The snag is that the concept has been rather void of content. An attempt to define the concept through a number of distinctive features, and then to operationalize these was presented by the present author in 1985 (see Laine 1986b). Various groups of 'filter raisers' are discussed briefly below.

In a broad view, all affective factors can contribute to the 'filter': attitudes and motivation, personality traits and self-ratings all have their affective elements which may be negative toward TL learning or things connected with it. This means that the learner 'turns away' from the subject, and even his perception of incoming information is biassed: part

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of it will be ignored, part will be misconstrued, and only a minor part will be 'taken in' roughly in the form that it was sent. Some of these 'filter raisers' are averse/negative attitudes toward the target language the ethnic group/nation speaking it, or target culture; hostile or 'superior' attitudes are not a rarity even today. Secondly, in the case of school learning, fatigue and some feelings of aversion tend to set in with many students after a few years of school. This carries over into TL learning, even more so as FLs are often considered the most difficult school subjects. Third, several factors in the learning situation may act as 'filter raisers': the TL course will be found unpalatable by some learners, instructional methods will be seen as dull, artificial, or naive by others; few teachers will be approved of whole-heartedly by all students. At this juncture we may stop and ask how many school FL learners without strong 'filters' can exist? And the worst is perhaps yet to come: if the learner's notion of himself, his self concept, is weak ("I am no good at anything!"), his mind will certainly be seriously blocked against the best of attempts to help him to his trough of English (or whatever).

2. The self concept

The self concept is "a person's view of himself as he experiences himself, as others experience him and as he would wish to be as a psychical and physical being" (Hirsjärvi 1982:115). "The self concept is the sum total of the views that a person has of himself and consists of beliefs, evaluations, and behavioural tendencies. This implies that the self-concept can be considered to be "a plethora of attitudes towards the self which are unique to each individual" (Burns 1982:29). It is considered a very essential part of personality (Brown 1981, Coleman 1960, Epstein 1976, Jersild 1969, Pölkki 1978), and if it grows askew, the learner and the educator alike are in sore trouble:

> There is no action that a teacher can take that a child with a negative self-concept cannot interpret in a negative way. No matter how positively others might interpret the action, the child can still interpret it in a negative way... The self-concept is like an inner filter - every perception that enters the individual must go through the filter. As each perception passes through the filter, it is given meaning, and the meaning given is determined largely by the view of the individual has of himself. If it is a negative view, every experience is stamped with a frown. If it is a positive view, each new experience is stamped with a smile. (Burns 1982:14; emphasis added).

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Here, then, we have the potential kernel of the 'filter' device (cf. Laine 1986b: 5). The concept has many forms, of which the academic self concept with its school subject (TL) specific forms is of special interest here. The influence of the self concept on school achievement has been shown to be the stronger, the more specific forms are in question (see Burns 1982: 206-218).

A global concept consisting of a person's every possible notion of, and attitude toward, himself is difficult to approach: we must try to structure it somehow. This is not so easy, since a great number of views and terms are found in the literature. The following sketchy presentation represents a view which finds large acceptance. According to this view, the components of self-esteem, real/actual self and ideal self are essential elements of the self concept (Burns 1982, Coleman 1960, Lehtovaara and Koskenniemi 1978, Pölkki 1978). These are very clearly significant in the specific case of FL learning, and will be included in our 'model'. Of these, self-esteem is very central, representing 'a general measure of self' (Backman and Secord 1968:42). It is 'the worth that persons place upon themselves' (Brown 1981:114), and 'probably the most important requirement for effective behaviour' (Coopersmith 1971:343). Many researchers use the term interchangeably with 'self concept'.

The real/actual (or, 'cognized') self represents a person's notions (beliefs, cognitions) of what he really is like, while the 'ideal self' reveals what he would like to be (or do); it also contains an element saying what he ought to be, ie. the critical self (on these concepts see Coleman 1960, Coopersmith 1967, Jersild 1969, Pölkki 1978, Rauste-von Wright 1981). (In addition to these aspects, possibly also the 'other' or 'social' self should be taken into account; in this context, it will be considered to some extent under 'cognized' self.) Regarding the relations between these subconcepts, 'self-esteem' is to be seen as resulting largely from the interplay between 'actual self' and 'ideal self'; hierarchically, then, it can be placed 'above' the other two (here cf. Burns 1982:24).

The self concept tends to determine what a person does in situations (Burns 1982:14), ie. there is a behavioural tendency, and there are expectations of what will happen to the person in those situations. These experiences can be anxious and averse, and many defences and inhibitions are connected with them. This understandably happens especially with persons with weak self concepts. Remembering how significant/destructive these inhibitive feelings can be to FL learning (consider here Stengel 1939), it seems feasible to stick to Brown's (1981:116) idea and 'subsume

/inhibitions/ under the notion of self-esteem' (self-esteem here equals the 'self concept').

On the other hand, the self concept can be conceived of as appearing at different levels (Brown 1981; Laine 1986b), namely, global, specific, and the task level. Speaking of learners' academic and TL specific self concepts these aspects will naturally loom large in 'filter' research. The resulting picture of a learner's academic/TL specific self concept, however, can only be adequately interpreted against the background of his 'general global' self concept. For instance, the 'general global' can be low/weak for reasons outside the learning situation (eg. family reasons) affecting the 'academic' levels; in the opposite case, factors in the learning situation may account for 'defects'. In research, this must be taken into account (see later chapter 4).

3. Some findings concerning 'mental block' factors

In a study of FL learning motivation Laine (1978) analysed school FL learners' 'short term motivation' which appears in the FL learning situation, and found it equally significant with 'long term motivation' as a determinant of achievement (Laine 1978:105). In an elaboration where motivation leading to over- or underachievement was the problem, it was shown that an optimal achievement-geared situation in the FL class (high general achievement level, high self-evaluation regarding chances of doing even better) promoted overachievement, ie. the students achieved even higher than was predictable through their measures of aptitude. Yet, also underachievement gets clearly accentuated in the school learning situation; there are even signs that in a good FL class, the eventual group of 'slow' learners' tend to sink deeper and deeper, and in a poor class, an eventual group of good learners get extra 'promotion'.

The connection between overachievement and affective motivation was clear in both forms of motivation. Teacher competence and pedagogical orientation, as well as some positive factors in the home background tended to promote overachievement. What ultimately seemed to distinguish overachievers was their positive affective attitudes toward classroom activities, whereas underachievers were characterized by negative attitudes toward TL learning, TL class anxiety, and notions of the difficulty of TL learning; they quite simply had no will to study TL, but planned giving it up as soon as possible. (Laine 1978:106-113).

For reasons discussed in the first chapters and the results cited above, more and more attention has been paid by the present author to affective factors, and recently to the self concept. One or two recent findings are touched upon here.

In a study carried out at the University of Joensuu (Makkonen et al. 1985) with comprehensive school learners of English (N= 120) in Eastern Finland showed that students with weak self concepts were characterized by inactivity, unwillingness to read or communicate in the TL, nervousness and irritability in the TL class, and feelings that the teacher was not satisfied with them. Typically, they were low achievers. (In this study, too, many high achievers felt that they received too high marks/grades from their teachers.)

In a study not documented so far, trainee teachers studied streamed language classes (N approx.= 25 for each stream) looking for differences in view of 'filter factors' with short/medium/long course learners of English. The short course low achievers were not willing to communicate, but did not show many signs of anxiety. The most interesting finding concerned long course high achievers compared with the 'mediums': while they were confident about their skills (real/performing self), their global and specific self concepts appeared weaker than those of the 'mediums', which may be a sign of the 'ideal/critical self' exerting its influence.

The two studies mentioned last call attention, besides general observations familiar from previous research, and some single features, to the significance of the subconcepts of 'other self' and 'critical self', to be remembered in a wider study to follow as an eventual enlargement of the theoretical framework (cf. chapters 2 and 4).

4. Toward an operationalization

As was proposed in chapter 2, essential subconcepts to be operationalized in self concept research are self-esteem, the real/actual self and the ideal self. A 'critical self' aspect is posited under the subconcept of 'ideal self', and the 'other self' aspect can possibly be considered under 'cognized self'. Inhibitions/defences were considered essential in a study of (weak) self concepts, and were included in the model. Further, the three levels, global, specific, and task level, were included. We thus get the cross-tabulation presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Components and levels of the self concept

LEVELS	COMPONENTS: Ideal	Actual	Self-esteem	Inhibitions
Global				
Specific				
Task				

An operationalization of the concept(s) into research variables can now take place according to the following scheme:

(1) Measures of the general self concept. The general self concept is measured sufficiently to give a background (see shapter 2). As the 'general global' level alone would obviously be too vague, also some items from the 'specific' level will be included, representing aspects like the learner's notions of his abilities, (possibly) looks, and worth/dignity.

(2) Measures of the academic self concept. Items representing the 'global' and 'specific' levels of the learner's notions of himself as a scholar, chosen analogously with the items under (1) above.

(3) Measures of the 'language ego'. Here, the three levels appear: (1) the learner's notions of himself as a 'linguist' at large, (2) as a TL learner, and (3) in TL learning tasks (see Brown 1981, Laine 1986b).

(4) Inhibitions/defences. Inhibitions/defences tie in with every category above, from task level feelings to generalized feelings of anxiety: (1) at the 'general global' level, as feelings of alienation, and of dissatisfaction with oneself; (2) at the 'general academic' level, as general nervousness and fear of mistakes; (3) at the 'general L2 level', as strain caused by alien culture/ language, linguistic anxiety, and fear of L2 errors; (4) at the 'specific' TL level, as generalized feelings of strain, shame, insufficiency, guilt, etc., and fear of errors in TL use; and (5) at the TL 'task' level, as specific instances of (4) above.

In the operationalization scheme, then, special attention is paid to the 'language ego', and even more to inhibitions. Similarly, the 'specific' and 'task' levels are focussed on, as these correlate more strongly with TL

learning outcomes than the general/global level does (Brookover et al. 1964).

5. Conclusion

The old 'model' of TL learning motivation included the learner's 'self-ratings' (see eg. Gardner and Lambert 1972, and the rest of the studies in that framework). Their logical 'placement' in a model of the inner structure of motivation was analyzed and tested later (Laine 1978). The contents of this significant variable, however, has remained a unidimensional evaluation of one's TL skills, good, poor, or 'so-so'. It will be seen that the construct of self-concept is much larger, and that numerous further significant aspects have to be considered if we want to make adequate research in the field of 'filter' factors. While the theoretical 'place' of the self concept in a model of 'filter' factors seems clear (Laine 1986b) as well as in one of FL learning motivation (Laine 1978; Laine 1986a, 4.3.-4.4.), the present discussion can promote such adequate research, meaningful both theoretically and from the viewpoint of FL teaching practice.

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